



Lessons Learned: the 20th Gatherings in Biosemiotics

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Abstract

We review the organization and contents of the 20th Gatherings in Biosemiotics. As the organizers, we share our insights from organizing a community research project in the year where the Covid-19 pandemic halted international travel. We try to describe the challenges of putting together the yearly conference on Biosemiotics and the main content that was presented by the research community.

Keywords Biosemiotics · Conference · Current research

Preparations

Plans are never set in stone, and it takes a whole community to face an overwhelming adversity and turn it into an open possibility for academic cooperation. 2020 was a year of unprecedented complexity for society as a whole, with the dangers of disease and economic downturn on every corner.

Announced in 2019 during the 19th Gatherings in Biosemiotics held in Moscow, Russia, the city of Olomouc was chosen as the place to celebrate the 20th anniversary of our yearly meetings, to be organized by the Department of General Linguistics at Palacký University. Though the 20th Gatherings were to be organized during summer, the unexpected emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic pushed the date until November as we waited to see whether conditions would improve internationally. The abstracts were evaluated by the Department of General Linguistics, that is, Ludmila Lacková, Dan Faltýnek, Lukáš Zámečník and Claudio Rodríguez, with the help of Kalevi Kull at the University of Tartu, Donald Favareau at the National University of Singapore and Morten Tønnessen at the University of Stavanger. This very special date for biosemiotics—the 20th birthday of the Gatherings—was put in peril because the pandemic showed no signs of a real slowdown. Instead, the Czech

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Republic was hit with an intense second wave of COVID-19, making the country unsafe for traveling. While first entertaining the possibility of a hybrid conference, with some presentations in person in Olomouc and some online, travel and gathering restrictions made it impossible to organize the conference in person.

Following Dan Faltýnek's suggestion to opt for a fully online conference, we organized the setting for a virtual meeting. The Board of the ISBS accepted and the attentive advice and assistance of Kalevi Kull, Don Favareau, Paul Cogley and Yogi Hendlin made the process much swifter, for which we were tremendously grateful.

Commemorating the 20 years of Gatherings meant that 2020 had to be special, and so we prepared a book, alongside Kalevi Kull, to be published for the occasion. The book, containing articles that made reference to the past, present and future of biosemiotics, was a shared endeavor, taking as a point of reference the book edited in 2012 by Silver Rattasepp and Tyler Bennett. Our book (Lacková et al., 2020) aimed at including articles by established voices, Czech biosemioticians and younger researchers. It also included a brief review of the Gatherings that have taken place since 2012 and the abstracts accepted for this year's Gatherings. Remembering researchers who have since passed as well as aiming at building a collective future, the book celebrates the social dimension of biosemiotics and tries to open new spaces for future areas of research.

The Conference

The Gatherings in Biosemiotics are no strangers to long-distance presentations, but organizing a conference where every presenter would be located on a different place implied a different kind of logistics. As it had become customary for many of us, we decided to use one of the main platforms for remote meetings. The wide availability of Zoom was one of the factors for us to choose the platform, which we had also been using in our regular teaching since the beginning of the pandemic. The scalability of the application made it a good candidate as well, and the easy interfacing with YouTube made the choice final for us. One of the important points we wanted to impress with the conference was that everyone could access it, and so we set up our Zoom conference, which was also streamed through YouTube and Twitter via Periscope (defunct as of this writing).

The program of the conference was rich in new topics as well as elaborations of topics already present in the field. Given the electronic format, we tried to keep presentations short and condensed in only three days, which resulted in very intense afternoons full of brilliant talks and inspiring arguments. The whole conference was registered and is fully available on YouTube.¹

The first day of the conference reflected on the topics of simultaneity and anticipation, as well as on important question about the past, present and future of biosemiotics. The dominance of topics on semiosis, translation and meaning altogether

¹ Accessible at the time of this writing on https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLumf4kcRXr_6803Fg6kclSR9tRkldcr5Y.

make a case for a biosemiotics that aims to studying its fundamental level of work. Animal cognition, a very robust area of research within the biosemiotic umbrella, was also a central feature, but there was also an opening to an area that has, to this date, been underexplored and in need of more development, namely, quantitative methods in biosemiotics and the application of biosemiotic theories in more grounded analyses of human communication.

We held a poster session in between the plenary talks where poster presenters could share their posters through screen sharing and talk about their research in the span of five minutes each. The more philosophically focused topics of the day were still mostly concerned with how cognition can be represented at different levels of biological complexity and what terminology is apt for describing it through semiotics.

The second day of the conference offered critical approaches about the place of biosemiotics within the sciences as well as problems not addressed by biosemioticians dealing with double articulation and consciousness. These more abstract problems were, however, met with more grounded perspectives on ecology, communication models and habit. Ecology, being one of the more promising and necessary areas of research for biosemiotics, saw representation at a more foundational level: What can biosemiotics say about problems derived from human action in natural environments? What do organisms do in changing environments?

The relevance of organic codes, though seemingly a minor interest in current biosemiotic research, is a fertile area of research for the field. Its promising theory is still to be fully apprehended by biosemioticians.

Embodied cognition is still a strong point of influence for researches focused on cognitive semiotics grounded on biosemiotic research. Peirce and Sebeok are still represented as views that feed principles of semiotics, but more metatheoretical questions were raised about the status of biosemiotics and the transdisciplinary challenges faced by the field. More practical and grounded research dealing with ecosocial issues such as climate change and its impact on the symbolic world of organisms were some of the newer and very promising research projects for the near future.

The last day we hosted a final set of four sessions with topics on what biosemiotics can offer education, research on language and biosemiotics, and the biosemiotic dimension of human-animal communication and interaction.

Embodied cognition, enactivism, representationalism and Umwelt theory were some of the highlights of the day, with different potential branches stemming out from biosemiotic research informed by philosophy of mind. Peirce was, once again, a central figure for multiple presenters, but an increased interest in the metatheory of biosemiotics and ways in which philosophy of science can help us understand the field cropped up, further evolving the biosemiotic landscape for the better.

Besides the particularity of the online format of the 20th Gatherings, it was a special conference for many other reasons: A large crowd, many new faces and a celebration of what the Gatherings in Biosemiotics have done to this day. Biosemioticians demonstrated the resilience and persistence of the field, showing that the impetus for knowledge is stronger than the difficulty and particularity of the situation the world had to endure at that time.

Lessons in Hindsight

The technical aspects of the conference were nothing short of rustic, with a home set-up, an institutional Zoom account, OBS Studio and a selection of images besides the streamed video. More important though was our social media engagement through Twitter and, to a lesser degree, Facebook. Though there are mechanisms in place by the ISBS and the *Biosemiotics* journal, we were directly engaged in promoting the conference and trying to keep people up to date through email.

Setting up a functional, simple and decent looking website was of prime importance in creating the identity of the conference, as we wanted to make attendants feel that this was the *Olomouc* Gatherings, even if they couldn't be there at all. We set up a virtual package with goodies for attendants: A copy of the book published on the occasion of the conference, information about the city of Olomouc, the book of abstracts and themed wallpapers. This, we believe, made the experience more relatable as a proper conference, reminding attendants of some of the parts that compose the experience of traveling somewhere to meet researchers, communicate with them and dig deeper into their research.

Streaming the conference through YouTube meant that we could have a public archival of the integrity of the 20th Gatherings, following in the footsteps of the 2018 Gatherings (Hendlin, 2019), and thanks to the funding we already had in place, we were able to ship physical copies of the book to participants once the editorial had it ready for publication.

The particular situation of the 20th Gatherings was a learning experience. With this Gatherings being the first one to be a fully online experience, there are multiple lessons that we can carry with us as a community.

First Lesson: Engagement Though we went through the effort of building social media presence and keeping track of our contacts, engagement went hand in hand with previous knowledge of the field. We believe that in the future, stronger social media presence from both organizers and institutions related to biosemiotics can only benefit from expanding their reach. Given the nature of the conference as an online encounter, this became much more apparent because viewership, connections, mentions, etc. are easier indicators of what is going on with people beyond the core group that is more or less there every year. Future growth will not only depend on excellent research, but on how far that research can reach for individuals who may not be close to the concepts used by semiotics.

Second Lesson: Technical Reliability We had a plan in mind in case our connections and streams failed. Luckily for us we did not have to resort to backups, but technical problems are always closer than they appear. In hindsight, there were still so many more things that could have gone wrong when it came to the technology we used for the conference. Zoom is still fairly reliable even in case of disconnection of the host, but having access to a shared messaging system and a backup stream should be of paramount importance; this was the case for us as neophytes to online conference

organization and we were grateful for it even if we didn't have to rely on our backup stream.

Our stress tests before the conference went fairly well and we were confident enough about our backup plan that we did not anticipate nor encounter real technical issues from our side. Our YouTube stream went well and for the most part the technical end worked well. However, one thing to keep in mind is that technical reliability will not be the same for everyone included in the conference—connection hiccups and delays can only be mitigated by diligence from the presenters.

As a lesson that we learned from this, it is important to stress to presenters that their reliability is important, to test their equipment and to have some mild certainty that they are able to both connect and stream. In cases where presenters are aware of limitations in terms of connectivity or hardware reliability, working out a solution with organizers is extremely important, with prerecorded presentations an actual possibility to avoid hiccups and uncomfortable gaps during the live stream. This leads to the third lesson we learned from organizing the conference.

Third Lesson: Flexibility All conferences have a certain amount of flexibility, because the unexpected can always be expected. Working out solutions with presenters with technical issues can help mitigate instream issues when these problems are expected beforehand, but their failure to connect, hardware malfunction or unexpected internet shortages can always happen at the worst possible moment. When these issues are simply unavoidable, it's on the organizers and their support circle to find flexibility, fill in the gaps and proceed. Negotiation of the schedule when a presenter disappears at the last minute should be kept in mind at all times. Decisions must be made on the fly, so direct communication with session chairs and presenters will help keep things rolling and avoid gaps in the conference.

A particular point to make here is that non-conventional presentations, such as posters, will need creative solutions. What we opted for was shorter presentations and availability of posters off-stream in order to replicate the feeling of a poster session during an in-person conference. Though this allows poster presenters to be heard, it removes the more personal interaction of the poster itself, with attendants not able to relate specific questions to presenters and presenters limited to a very short time-frame to have their say. The linearity imposed may also be a limiting factor for presenters wishing to make an impression during their poster presentations, but there is higher visibility in taking the central stage, so to speak.

Ultimately, as we head to a return to normalcy, there is a chance that conferences will remain in a hybrid modality for a longer time, responding to travel restrictions, but also to the increasing awareness of the issues that come with conferences as polluters (Jäckle, 2021). We believe the relative success of the 20th Gatherings was a product of a high amount of good will and kindness from presenters and institutions, a decent amount of technical testing and a familiar means of connecting through video chat with multiple people across the world. A close average attendance of 100 people every day of the conference may not sound impressive at all, but with almost 2000 views in total for the conference at the time of this writing, these numbers speak to an increasing interest in biosemiotics. This is still a humble conference in terms of publicity, involvement and public interest, but these lessons we learned may

offer a glimpse into a transformative era for both the Gatherings in Biosemiotics and the discipline as we welcome more people and we make our research more widely available in engaging ways.

We do not know what the future holds, but the adaptability of biosemiotics makes us confident about this little meaningful corner of research.

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